

Vermillion; Étranger À L'arc Rouge Vermillion ; 朱き強弓 のエトランジェ

Tahfu

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Chapter 12 – Relic

It was a deep sleep, one without even dreams.

As if realizing it were an illusion, Kei suddenly awoke with a short gasp.

There was a sensation as if he'd been dragged up from the bottom of the ocean all the way to the surface at once. Above his narrow bed, the first thing he saw was a plain wooden ceiling. He quickly sat up straight, trying to shake off the remaining drowsiness.

The room he was in was cozy.

Gentle sunlight shone in from the open window. The room was spotlessly clean; there wasn't even a speck of dust. However, it was packed so full with bundles of bug repellant herbs, chests, and other various everyday commodities that it gave off the impression of a storeroom.

Somehow—it looked familiar.

Huh? Isn't this the room Aileen was sleeping in?

Yes, this was definitely the house of Cronen, the village leader's second son. However, he was monopolizing the only bed in the room as if it were his.

Aileen.

"...Where did she go?!" He tried to jump out of bed as he shouted, but he suddenly felt a sharp pain in his left cheek. "Agh..." he groaned and stopped, timidly reaching a hand to his face. It felt rough and ached. It seemed that there was some sort of compress stuck to his cheek like a scab. It's where he was cut during his fight with the bandits last night. He recalled leaving it untreated.

I guess someone treated it...

The tips of his fingers gave off a smell of medicine that tickled his nose. The village shaman Anka probably doubled as their medicine woman and did this. Once again met with pain when he touched the inside of his cheek with his tongue, he got a little depressed thinking that it would be hard to speak or eat for a while.

But that didn't matter, not right now.

Aileen. Where did she go?

Kei slipped out of bed, opened the door with a heavy thud, and left the room. On top of being small, the structure was simple, the door opened to the living room. In the center was a dining table, at which sat a little girl going, "Aaah," with her mouth open and a spoon full of soup in hand. Their eyes locked.

Kei remained in the doorway and she froze with her spoon still in front of her face.

She was a cute little girl, probably around three or maybe four years old. She stared with wide, reddish-brown eyes at Kei. Her chestnut hair fell to her shoulders and her lightly freckled face radiated innocence. She was frozen stiff as if she had run into a bear or something.

“...Hi,” Kei awkwardly smiled and tried to start a conversation to relieve her nervousness.

However, he had completely forgotten his own appearance.

He was wearing armor that was painted with his own and others’ blood, his muscular body towered over others in this world, and because of his wound, his smile appeared crooked and menacing. Of course an innocent little girl would be scared of such a villainous looking character.

“Kyaaaaaa!” A beat late she screamed cutely. She jumped out of her chair and ran outside, still holding the spoon, as she yelled, “Mama—!”

The steaming soup on the dining table was the only other thing there. Dejected, Kei lowered his hand.

After a short time, the sound of small footsteps running came from outside.

A young freckle-faced girl came into the house. “Good morning. I see that you’ve woken up.”

Her hands were wet, perhaps from doing laundry, and she wiped them off on her apron as she looked down.

Kei thought that he had seen her somewhere before. He remembered the young freckle-faced girl giving him a warm welcome last night and telling him the news of Aileen nearly dying while he was at the village leader’s house. Considering the situation, she was probably Cronen’s wife.

“Morning. And sorry, it seems that I frightened your daughter.” Kei shrugged, looking towards the doorway.

From outside the little girl was peeking in the door, but she quickly hid.

“No, she just isn’t used to people from outside the village... She’s probably just nervous. Jessica, come on out.”

“No!” She responded to her mother from outside.

Kei gave a wry smile, *Well she doesn’t seem to like me.*

“Ah, I’m Tina, Cronen’s wife.”

“I’m Kei, nice to meet you. If you don’t mind, I’d like to ask, the person that I brought was left here for care. Do you know where she is right now?”

“Your friend is at the village leader’s house.”

Kei sighed in relief after hearing her brisk reply.

“I see, so she’s awake again...”

“Oh, no, she’s still sleeping.”

“Huh?”

Kei thought that because she was awake she’d been invited to the village leader’s house, but it seemed that assumption was wrong.

Then, to answer why he had taken her place here, Tina said, “Yesterday, my husband and some others tried to carry you when you collapsed, but you were too heavy for them to move you far. Your friend was very light, so we thought it would be easier to move her to the village leader’s house and have you stay here...”

“Oh... Sorry, I suppose I gave you some trouble.”

If he had on his full armor on top of his large, muscular body, then of course he’d be heavy. His bracers, shin guards, helmet, and other small pieces of gear were removed, but with just his leather chest piece and chainmail he would still be quite heavy.

But, where did his armor and Dragon Stinger go?

“Ah, your armor is with our village’s leatherworker. Fathe— The village leader asked for him to look at it.” She said, anticipating his intention, when she saw Kei feel for the scabbard on his waist and casually look around.

“I see, thank you.” He thought that maybe they had stolen his stuff, so knowing exactly where it all went relieved him. *Well... I guess when I went unconscious, if the villagers were all evil, they would’ve stripped both me and Aileen of all our belongings.*

A village-wide robbery. There wasn’t such a harsh trap in the game, but the world did reference such acts often in documents. A cold sensation ran down his back when he considered Tahfu to be one of those villages. And then he realized that he was only thinking of such possibilities now, even though he was so calm last night.

After explaining the situation, Tina’s expression grew confused when she saw Kei’s face turn serious as he got lost in thought.

Before the silence grew too long, “Hey, I see you’re up.” Cronen spoke from outside the door, holding four or five pitchforks on his shoulder. A thin sweat coated his forehead, it seems he was doing some farm work.

“Yeah, thanks to a good rest I’m much better now. Sorry for the trouble.”

“What are you talking about, it’s not a problem at all.” Cronen smiled in response to Kei’s gratitude.

Kei tilted his head and thought that Cronen was much more friendly than last night.

“Oh yeah, now that you’re awake, my father wanted to talk to you. Are you ready?”

“The village leader’s house?”

“Yeah.”

He also wanted to check on Aileen so he replied without hesitation, “Yeah, let’s go.”

Kei gave a serious nod. And then his stomach gave a magnificently loud growl. He failed to understand what just happened and Cronen blinked in surprise. A small giggle escaped Tina before she spun around with her hand over her mouth, trembling slightly.

At some point, Jessica must have hidden behind Cronen because she came out and asked in a nasally voice, “Are you hungry?”

“So it would seem.” Kei answered as if talking about a different person, causing Cronen and Tina to laugh loudly. He had admired the phenomenon of one’s stomach rumbling when they were hungry since he was young, but he said it so seriously that he inadvertently made it even funnier.

“Tina, there’s still some soup left, right?” Cronen asked through his smile.

“Yes, there is.”

“Give our starving guest some lunch. I’ll call my father here.” He ruffled Jessica’s hair and quickly left the house. He laughed unrestrained outside.

Jessica was left standing and staring up at Kei with big round eyes as she licked her spoon like candy.

“Please, take a seat. It’s just normal soup, but I hope you’ll like it.”

In a wooden bowl, she served Kei some soup from a ceramic pot while smiling.

Finally getting embarrassed, Kei sat down with a, “Thanks.”

Jessica sat down across from Kei and kicked her legs back and forth under the table as she began to eat again.

Now that he had soup, he also began to eat. It was a viscous yellow soup. It had a rough texture and it gave off a faint sweet aroma. It seemed like the only thing used to season it was salt; perhaps the ingredients were good, but it really brought out the vegetables’ flavors.

“...It’s good. What is it?”

“It’s pumpkin porridge. Try dipping some bread in it,” she suggested as she picked up a basket with some hard bread.

The bread was pretty hard, but it looked like it would be easy to eat if it soaked up some soup.

After taking one taste of the relaxing vegetable and grain meal, Kei became aware of just how hungry he was, and he began to eat enthusiastically. He thought it was weird that Jessica didn’t reach for the bread at all, but it was probably difficult for a little girl to eat the hard bread. Instead, it looked like some rice was mixed into her soup to make a risotto.

Tina continued to stir the pot with a big grin, periodically refilling the bowl that Kei emptied apologetically, as she watched over the two of them.

“I’m back!” Bennett’s house and Cronen’s house weren’t that far apart. The timing seemed almost intentional, but Cronen came back after just long enough for Kei to start feeling relaxed.

“Kei-dono, I’m glad to see you’re awake.” Bennett’s cane thumped as he came in.

Danny was just behind him with his insincere smile.

Jessica had just finished eating and she put down her spoon, yelling excitedly, “Grandpa!”

“Ooh~ Jessica~, full of energy today, as usual?” His usual kind old man smile was replaced with a rare, overly careless broad grin. “Grandpa’s here~,” he said as he covered her forehead with kisses.

Bennett’s beard seemed to tickle Jessica making her giggle and yell playfully. Cronen and Tina smiled quietly, watching the two of them.

However, even in this gentle atmosphere, Danny wore a dry, fake looking smile. It made a strong impression on Kei.

“Now, Jessica. Since you’re all full, go play with your friends.”

“What about you, Grandpa?”

“We’ll play together later. For now I have to talk with this young man.”

“Hmm~ ... Okay.”

She was surprisingly understanding. She jumped out of her chair and scurried outside.

“...She’s such a cute granddaughter.”

“She certainly is,” Bennett nodded vigorously and grunted in approval.

Tina quickly cleared the table. She then used water she’d boiled in advance to pour everyone a cup of tea before excusing herself. “I’ll go wash the dishes.”

Only the men remained. The gentle, happy atmosphere naturally turned tense.

“Now then, Kei-dono. How are your wounds?” Bennett inquired as he sat down across from Kei.

“Much better now. Tina just treated me to a delicious meal and it seems that Anka treated my wound here,” he said, rubbing his injured cheek, recalling the pain.

“I’m glad to hear it. Her special salve works wonders. However, it certainly can’t compare to your potions.”

“I’ll have to thank her later then... Oh, village leader, I heard from Tina that you’ve even made arrangements for my equipment to be repaired,” Kei looked over at Cronen as he spoke.

Bennett smiled, “It would have been a shame to leave blood on such magnificent armor. I asked our village craftsman to take care of its maintenance, I apologize if it was presumptuous of me.”

“Not at all, I appreciate the help. Thank you.”

“It was my pleasure. We should help each other out in troubled times... Ah, how about we also have your leather chest piece repaired later, too?” Bennett graciously offered.

Bennett didn’t seem to have any ill intentions, so Kei forced a smile. “About that... I had something I wanted to talk about.”

“Oh, I see.” Bennett hit his palm with his fist as if he’d just remembered something, but it looked scripted, as if he’d entirely anticipated this. “Does it have to do with the bandits from yesterday? You were too exhausted for me to ask for details last night.”

“I apologize.”

“Don’t worry about it. Please let us hear what happened.”

“Of course.”

Kei told Bennett and the others of what happened after he left the village. How he’d spurred Mikazuki to the campsite that he and Aileen were first attacked at, attacked the thieves, and how he wiped them all out in exchange for Mikazuki’s life.

“Wiped out...” Bennett mused over Kei’s words. To not only win a fight against that many, but to entirely annihilate them was an unbelievable story. However, just by looking at Kei, it was obvious from the amount of blood that he had killed a number of people.

“I see. I understand... That place is near the Rocky Mountain, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And what of their bodies?”

"I just left them. It looked like they had some valuable things, but I didn't have time to grab anything."

Danny and Bennett's eyes sparkled and they involuntarily grinned for a moment after hearing that. Kei understood what direction this conversation was taking.

"In that case, we should most definitely go and retrieve their things, shouldn't we?"

"...Yes, probably. I'll guide you there."

"Good, however, Kei-dono, you're probably tired from your fight last night. We should let you rest peacefully today."

"Yes, since we know that it was around the Rocky Mountain, there's no need for you to come help out yourself," Danny continued Bennett's thoughts.

"My horse is still there too, so I'd like to go so I can mourn properly." Now they wouldn't be able to tell him not to come.

"I see. Well, if that's the case..."

"Oh my, then we'll be relying on you to guide us, Kei-dono."

"Of course. I've caused plenty of trouble for the village; I feel obligated to do at least this much."

Everyone laughed merrily together before dispersing to prepare for the recovery.

Cronen went off to gather helpers. Kei visited the village craftsman to pick up his armor and equipment.

"...'I've caused plenty of trouble for the village.' Humph. You can say that again," grumbled Bennett as he followed Danny to his house.

Danny shrugged his shoulders slightly, "I don't know, he might really just want to mourn his horse, father."

"Who knows..."

He may have spent many years happily with his horse, however Danny couldn't take Kei's reason at face value.

"Well, at any rate, I don't expect he's up to anything."

"Agreed." Bennett smiled bitterly, though it appeared just a little too forced. Unlike common bandits, the Ignaz should have had reasonably good quality equipment. He thought about deceiving Kei for one or possibly two swords, but it wouldn't be an easy feat.

"What happens will happen. Just get what you can, Danny."

“I know. I’ll bring a cart, father.”

Father and son snickered together. Their bodies were different, but their faces certainly looked the same.

† † †

Kei went to retrieve his leather chest piece from the village leather worker, but instead received his helmet, bracers, and greaves before returning to the village leader’s house.

When he stopped by for his Dragon Stinger, he saw the old leather worker admiring the bow. The leather worker eagerly asked, “What sort of sinew does this bow use?”

Kei answered honestly, “It uses the membrane of a wyvern’s wing.”

The craftsman burst into laughter and nodded many times as if Kei’s answer should have been obvious. “I’ve never seen the likes of it!” shouted the craftsman, apparently amused. He didn’t seem to believe Kei.

However after that, when the craftsman handled Kei’s leather set made from green salamander skin, he treated it carefully with nervous hands.

Kei chuckled to himself, *to frighten someone they need to have some sense of reality it seems*. The craftsman must have thought it was too absurd.

By the way, green salamanders were high level, large reptilian monsters that live deep in forests. If someone ran into one solo, the best option would be to run away.

They had a deep blue-ish green skin, as their name suggested, and could reach a body length of seven meters once fully grown; the incomparable kings of the forest.

Their maneuverability was a point that deserved special mention. Despite appearing slow-witted due to their freakishly large bodies, they were very fast runners in the woods. It went without saying, but if a tree could support their weight, they could even climb it and move around that way. At the very least, they weren’t something that Kei would be able to keep up with on foot.

Their tough skin protected them from most attacks and their thick muscle protected them from impact damage. Everything about them was dangerous. They had large arms, sharp claws, a long, serrated tail, and pointed teeth. However, their most dangerous quality was their massive size. No matter how strong the player, if a green salamander rammed them or leaned its weight on them, they would suffer instant death. In addition, they secreted poison containing a blood thinning agent from the gaps in their teeth, so if bitten, a player would not be able to stop the bleeding and

would die. However, due to the size of their mouths it was more common to be ripped to shreds before the poison could take effect.

At any rate, unlike wyverns, the green salamanders lived even in areas close to human habitations, so they were more commonly recognized as a threat. Although, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call them ground-crawling dragons; they possessed that much power.

It wasn't impossible to hunt them as long as the player set traps on the terrain, because once they began chasing their prey, they did so with reckless abandon. In the game, it became relatively popular among high level players to kill them for raw defensive materials. Although hunting them was possible, even carefully prepared parties often suffered accidental deaths.

Back then it would've be fine to end it with a laugh, but as the rear guard, Kei wouldn't want to challenge one of them now that it was reality.

"Kei-dono, I see that you're back." Neither Danny nor Cronen had returned to the house yet. Bennett was alone with a ledger spread open on the table.

"Yeah. I've left my leather chest piece with the craftsman for now."

"All right... Your chain mail is also quite impressive," Bennett said in admiration of Kei's outfit of bracers, greaves, helmet, and chain mail.

Now that the blood had been cleaned off his chain mail, it appeared even more splendid.

"This chain mail has saved my life many times." Kei rubbed the cold material, causing a pleasant metallic jingle.

"By the way, while everyone is still preparing I would like to check up on Aileen. Is that okay?"

"Why of course! Follow me." Bennett got up out of his chair with a grunt.

Kei followed Bennett through a door on the far side of this room. The room had bookshelves filled with scrolls and books. There was also an ornamental wooden chest. Spread out on the floor was a rug of a soft green hue, and a much higher quality bed than in Cronen's house.

Atop the bed lay the sleeping beauty.

She calmly breathed in and out, in and out. She looked like she was sleeping peacefully. Her hair, usually kept in a ponytail, lay unbound around her like golden threads. Someone must have changed her out of her dirty black clothes into the thin, clean, white clothes she wore now. Her complexion was no longer pale and there were no hints of pain. With the calm sunlight peeking into the room it almost looked like a beautiful painting.

"Aileen."

Kei walked up to the bedside and then knelt, stroking her head. She looked like she stirred slightly, but that may have just been a delusion brought by Kei's desire for her to wake up again.

"This morning, I heard her mumbling something," a delicate voice suddenly said.

Startled, Kei looked across the bed and saw a girl quietly standing there.

She was beautiful. Her body curved gorgeously. Her glossy, flaxen colored hair was kept trim and her skin was so white that one wouldn't think she was from an agricultural village. Her nose ran in a gracefully straight line. A gentle smile spread across her face. A beauty mark was beneath her gentle and seductive eyes. Perhaps that's why she was so beautiful, but some part of her slender figure gave off a feeling of melancholy.

"It was a foreign tongue, so I could not understand what she said..." the woman elaborated apologetically. She looked at Kei, who stood there silently, and politely said, "...I'm sorry for the late introduction. I am Cynthia, Danny's wife."

"O-oh. I'm Kei. Nice to meet you," Kei regained his composure and returned her greeting clumsily.

Cynthia giggled quietly.

"Sorry, I didn't realize you were there."

In the quiet room, Cynthia gently spoke, "It shows how much you worry for your friend."

"Yeah... I suppose. I guess you're right. Are you the one that's been taking care of her?"

"Yes, but only since this morning."

"I see... Thank you."

In response to his heartfelt gratitude she replied with a somewhat expected, "It was no trouble."

The sound of heavy footsteps approached from the other side of the door just as she finished speaking.

Danny opened the door and came through in a good mood. "Kei-dono! The preparations are finished! Let us be on our way!"

After seeing Danny's large stomach jiggle around in his high spirits, Kei thought to himself that no matter how hard he tried Danny would never pull off a convincing jolly fat man.

"Oh my, your friend—Aileen-dono is certainly beautiful, isn't she! She looks as if she could be a goddess...! Ah, Kei-dono, I understand wanting to stare at her forever, but we should get going before it gets dark!" Excited for some reason, Danny gestured a lot as he spoke loudly.

Kei thought that he shouldn't be openly praising another girl right in front of his wife, but Cynthia didn't react to it as she kept stroking Aileen's hair tenderly.

“You’re right, let’s go,” said Kei as he stood up and fixed his chain mail.

“Cynthia-san, I’m leaving Aileen in your care.”

She nodded, “Okay.”

Kei looked over at Aileen and murmured, “I’ll be back.” He pulled his mantle over himself and left the room.

The recovery team was composed of eight members.

Kei, Cronen, Danny, Mandel, and four men from the village guard. Kei rode on Sasuke while a few others, including Danny, rode in a cart and the remaining members walked.

After his reins were unfastened from the pole Sasuke gave Kei a questioning look that seemed to ask, ‘Where are we going?’ In response, Kei said, “We’re getting Mikazuki.”

Kei earnestly felt like running away when he saw Sasuke look happy and flick his tail, possibly from hearing ‘Mikazuki’.

They exited the forest and continued out onto the grassy plains.

It was completely different from last night. The journey to their destination was rather peaceful.

The weather was nice and there was a gentle breeze. Small puffy clouds dotted the blue sky.

Sasuke’s hooves making a slow clapping sound as Kei matched the pace of the villagers that were walking. They slowly followed the rarely traveled path, and it felt like they were going out on a picnic.

However, as they approached the rocky mountain the peaceful delusion dissipated.

The piercing sound of the incessant cawing of birds gave him an unpleasant feeling. There sure are a lot of them. Where did they even come from? Kei thought to himself.

The ground was covered with birds eagerly pecking at something.

Once they got closer to it the air was mixed with the presence and stench of death. In the middle of the gently sunlit plains their sense of sight, smell, and hearing were all thrown into disarray just like a flubbed note in a symphony. It reminded Kei of a sky burial¹.

“Hey, shoo, shoo! Get out of here!” Danny dismounted and swung around a rod to chase off the birds. The birds jumped up and flapped their wings noisily as they vocalized their spite to the intruder who suddenly interrupted their meal.

As the veil of feathers lifted, the corpses came openly into view. Everyone was at a loss for words.

1 Sky Burial: “Sky burial is a funeral practice in which a human corpse is placed on a mountaintop to decompose while exposed to the elements or to be eaten by scavenging animals, especially carrion birds.” — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sky_burial

It looked as if someone had thrown dark red paint all over the place. Human bodies looked like they'd exploded into pieces. The corpses were too damaged for just one night with the birds.

One body was pinned to a rock by an arrow through its skull.

Another had his neck almost entirely ripped apart.

A third corpse's chest collapsed in on itself with an arrow stabbing through its ribs and into its heart.

Another corpse's right foot was torn to shreds and his head resembled the inside of a pomegranate. The men there had not the slightest idea what happened to cause such a scene.

They couldn't grasp it. Their feelings were all jumbled up.

The corpses' eyes were pecked out and their skin and muscle were ruthlessly torn apart by the birds. It was so bad that you could only guess at what their expressions had been when they died.

However, everyone was equally exposed to the brutality. It was almost as if they could still hear the bandits' dying screams.

Someone retched.

The birds noticed the people weren't moving and a number of them came back and began to feed on the bodies again.

One large crow bit a hole into a corpse's stomach and pecked around inside the wound before it smoothly grabbed and dragged out the large intestines.

The intestine plopped onto the ground, and even with the blood mostly drained it appeared red and wet. With its black eyes the crow stared at Kei on his horse while it sloppily ate.

Kei resisted the urge to vomit. The strong stench of the corpses along with the black and red bloody spectacle alone were enough to make one nauseated.

What's more, he was the one that killed them. Now, Kei saw the reality of the situation.

Pale-faced, Kei sat on his horse and stared up at the sky. He didn't feel any regret, nor any guilt. He was a victim himself. There was enough reason for him to righteously kill them. In Kei's mind, they sincerely deserved to die and no one should condemn him for doing it.

That's what he told himself.

Nevertheless, it was still gross.

One of the younger villagers couldn't bear it and fell to his knees as he threw up. The others put their hands over their mouths, but some couldn't hold it back and they, too, vomited.

Of those who didn't vomit, Danny's face was pale and Cronen didn't look too good. However, despite the conditions, Mandel seemed to be fine.

"Kei," Mandel looked at him and said quietly, "Next time, try to do it a little cleaner. It's easier to take care of afterwards." Without waiting for a response, Mandel approached one of the nearby corpses that was less damaged and began searching it.

Following that, Danny raised his voice to the other villagers, "Hey, let's get it together!"

"...All right." Kei mumbled and quietly dismounted Sasuke before approaching it.

It was terrible. After only one night Mikazuki's body was only a shadow of his former magnificent fur and sturdy muscles.

Starting with the arrow wound in his stomach, the birds picked and tore at his guts. Cynically, but still ironically, a number of bird corpses lay scattered around Mikazuki. They were killed by the poison left in his body. Once Kei got closer, he could see that the ground was actually covered in insects such as ants and small beetles that swarmed to the meat. The only saving grace was that Mikazuki's headgear kept most of the damage out of sight.

"I'm sorry," muttered Kei as he stroked Mikazuki's nose. "I'm sorry, Mikazuki."

Bururu.

Next to Kei, Sasuke snorted and flicked his head several times as well as nudging Mikazuki's body with his nose.

After closing Mikazuki's eyes Kei stood up and gently patted the nape of Sasuke's neck. "Now then..."

A bird does not foul the nest it is about to leave — that is, he can't leave cleaning up to the others when he caused the mess. He thought to himself that even though others may have felt sinful or responsible, he would only bear the truth as it was.

Kei passed by a body that was near him and approached the body of the skinny man with the pomegranate like head.

He started by pulling off the greaves that the man had worn on his shredded legs.

"Don't leave anything that looks valuable behind! And make sure you handle the leather goods carefully, don't damage them anymore than they are! Check their necks and their hands well, jewelry can fetch a good price—"

From the background Kei heard Danny do the only thing he was good at—giving direction —as the mechanical collection of items continued.

The spoils were leather armor, long swords, the golden short spear, rings, necklaces, and other jewelry. They also grabbed their purses before they turned around to head back to the village, now covered in blood.

—The eight bandits' bodies were left as they were.

Chapter 13 – Power

Part 1

Cheerful shouting resounded in the distance.

Countless white lights twinkled.

The dazzling lights were akin to the stars on a clear night.

The soft ground lay spread out in a twelve by twelve meter area.

This was the stage for fairies to dance.

Tchaikovsky, too, would become one of the fairies in this Swan Lake ballet².

Her movements flowed like water to the graceful melody.

Her body moved naturally.

She danced and twirled light-heartedly.

Tap.

She finished her dance.

Wild applause broke out.

With her great performance she naturally smiled.

She let a small, “I did it,” escape.

Everything she’d worked towards had finally been rewarded, she thought as she took in the golden light.

Just as she did, the scene abruptly changed.

She took a blow to the side.

All the splendid scenery was blown away.

Broken. Shattered. Pulverized.

It was hot. It hurt. Almost as if she were on fire.

She could smell gasoline and iron.

² Swan Lake Ballet: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swan_Lake It’s pretty famous, but I didn’t know about it, so I put it here just in case :p

There was broken glass and black smoke.

Her field of vision began to narrow.

A dark room.

The only light came from a computer monitor.

She sat up and held her shortened, rounded legs.

Escaped.

She kept escaping.

From the voice that beckoned her.

She plugged her ears.

The weather is nice, the voice said.

She closed the curtains.

Escaped.

She kept escaping.

To her imaginary world.

To her temporary world.

She wished for her future.

She wished for her past.

She ran.

She kept running.

Her vision blurred in the white mist.

On the other side... on the other side certainly—

—a pure white, calm, “Ai-le-en,” he stared into black emptiness. “A-i-le-en, Roh-a-chev-ska-ya.”

† † †

She woke with a shout, heart hammering, body covered in cold sweat.

Aileen sat bolt upright, shoving the sheets aside, her eyes wide as she rushed to feel for her legs. She ran her slender fingers over her thighs and down her calves before reaching her ankles.

“...” There was definitely bone and muscle.

She grabbed just above her ankles, and then relieved, the tension drained from her face and remained like that for a short while.

“...huh?”

She finally regained her senses and began to let her eyes wander.

The room wasn't that big.

Green rug. A chest engraved with a relief. Old books and scrolls lined a bookshelf. Gentle sunlight shown through the glassless window. The view was dotted with simplistic wooden cabins with a verdant forest in the background.

“...Where am I?” She mumbled to herself.

She suddenly looked down and realized that she wasn't wearing her black clothes, but rather a thin white dress. She ran her hands down her dress she noticed that her bra was gone, but she still wore underwear.

—*Why am I wearing this?* The question crossed her mind as her right hand that was feeling the dress moved to the right side of her chest.

The core of her body reverberated with pain as she had a flashback.

“Ah.” She remembered.

Crossing through the fog; the illusion of the grassy plains; the dim light from the campfire at the foot of the mountain; the coming night; the scenery.

The arrow piercing her chest. She remembered the pain of it gouging her as it was pulled out. In her head it was muddled and cloudy, almost as if it happened to someone else.

However, there was one thing that stood out clearly in her hazy memories.

A voice.

A voice that called her name.

“...Kei?” Alone in the room, she meekly called him.

However, there was no reply. Other than the occasional bird chirping outside the window, the room was silent.

Uneasy, Aileen gripped the end of the sheets in her fists with an expression of helplessness as she looked around the room. Suddenly, she took notice of the door.

It was made of wood and coated in a paint the same deep green as the rug.

She hesitated for several seconds. Aileen swallowed and made up her mind. She got out of bed and made sure not to make any noise. Her gait was unsteady, so she placed both hands on the wall and staggered to the door. Slowly, she pushed it open.

Creeeak. It was louder than she anticipated.

Even though she was scared, she left the room.

It led her to what resembled a living room that was a little bit larger than the other room. In the middle of the room was a large table and a metal chandelier with a design like a tree, hanging above it. There was no longer a rug on the floor; it was a rough timber instead. Compared to the rug, it was a bit dirty. She didn't really want to walk across it, but she didn't have many options.

She looked at the window. It was a simple window, and as she thought, there wasn't any glass. There was yet another door on the other side of the table, but it looked like that was the entrance.

Aileen wondered if she should leave.

She wanted to know where she was, but she was barefoot and she didn't know who was around in the first place.

As she hesitated, the door across the room creaked.

"...Oh my." A fair-skinned beautiful woman walked in. The basket she was carrying contained clean and neatly folded clothes. Suddenly faced with Aileen, who stood frozen, the beautiful woman—Cynthia, smiled sweetly and kindly addressed Aileen, "You're awake now, I see."

"Ah, um, yes." Cynthia's warm smile released a little of Aileen's tension, letting her move and nod her head somewhat.

"That's great. Your companion has been quite worried about you..."

"...Companion? You mean, Kei!?"

"Yes, Kei-sama."

"...I see... Kei is here..."

Cynthia placed the basket on the table and affirmed Aileen's words as she sincerely smiled. Relieved, Aileen dropped her shoulders.

"Yes. Right now he is out, but he should be returning any time now."

"I see... Thank you." Her legs suddenly grew weak with her relief.

She felt—heavy.

“...Do you not feel well? Oh, your body is probably just weak. You should lie down and—“

Before the worried looking Cynthia could finish what she was saying, they heard a noisy crowd of people outside. “Oh my, speak of the devil... Aileen-sama, it looks like Kei-sama has returned.” Cynthia smiled widely when she heard the rattling of a cart approaching.

“Really!?” Aileen’s face lit up.

It was silly, but it seemed like seeing Kei would be better for her than resting right now, thought Cynthia.

Oblivious to Cynthia’s kind gaze, Aileen hastily opened the front door. She cheerfully said, “Kei! You’re—” but her voice fell.

Outside was a dark red parade.

She first noticed the men who trudged along on foot, then the cart as its wheels clattered against the ground, and finally a young man riding a horse.

The young man rode a Bowser Horse and held a vermillion bow in his right hand; it was Kei, no doubt about it.

His bracers and chainmail were dark with dirt, and even at a distance his expression looked grim. He was the avatar that Kei used and the one that Aileen knew, but something was different. Even if she were asked, she wouldn’t be able to answer, but she still knew that something about how he looked was wrong.

—It was definitely Kei. But not the Kei that she knew.

Confused, she hesitated to call out to him.

“Aileen!?” While she was still confused, Kei noticed her and froze. “Aileen!! You finally woke up!”

His previously stern look disappeared without a trace as he nimbly jumped off the horse and ran toward her with a bright expression. He moved to embrace her, but stopped a few steps away from Aileen in her white dress after considering his bloodied outfit, “—I probably shouldn’t in these.”

A few steps.

So close, yet still out of reach.

Just a few steps away.

A distance so close, yet so far away.

They both stood there silently looking at each other. A perplexed smile crept onto both of their faces.

“Um, I... seem to have been sleeping, huh?” she smiled awkwardly.

Kei nodded after regaining his composure, “I suppose so. You slept for almost an entire day, you know. How do you feel? Do you remember what happened yesterday?”

“Hm, I feel... fine, I think. As for yesterday, I don’t remember much after we made a fire.”

“What about when you were hit with an arrow?”

“I remember that. After that it got hazy, almost like I was dreaming.”

“Okay...”

“Did you... use a potion on me?” asked Aileen as she rubbed the right side of her chest, the place where the arrow stabbed her.

“Yeah. Do you remember?”

“No, fortunately.”

Which meant that she didn’t remember the pain of the treatment either. Kei felt a little relieved that Aileen was so nonchalant. Not remembering certainly was fortunate.

He used a potion to heal his shoulder, so he knew firsthand that the pain was extraordinary. It was an experience that he would forget if he could.

The pain from simply healing his cut shoulder was like torture. Just how painful was it to heal a punctured lung from the inside? Even imagining it was frightening.

Left behind by Kei, Sasuke clopped his way over to them, “Bururu.” He closed his eyes and licked Aileen’s cheek as if asking, *Are you okay?* He flicked his tail around.

Aileen playfully laughed at Sasuke, “Ahaha, stop it, that tickles... wait,” she suddenly realized. “Why were you riding Sasuke? Where’s Mikazuki?”

Kei’s face darkened.

“He... died.”

Surprised, Aileen let out a small, “Eh?”

Kei pulled something out of Sasuke’s saddle and showed it to her. A piece of dark brown hide was folded and tied up.

“The bandits shot him with arrows... I just went back to get a memento.”

He'd made a talisman for his head piece out of Mikazuki's mane, and he'd taken some undamaged hide from his rear. Kei left the rest of Mikazuki's remains to nature.

"...I was thinking of getting a purse or something made from this." He laughed and the corners of his lips curled up into a smile, but he looked like he was in pain.

"O-oh, I see. *That's* why you have blood on you... it happened like that, huh?"

"Yeah, *that's* why. Some of it anyway."

Mandel had shown Kei how to skin, but Kei was the one who actually did the actual work. So saying that he got bloodied because of that wasn't a lie.

"But... What about his 'respawn'?" Aileen knit her brow.

"Aileen," Kei's expression tightened, "It's complicated, but we'll save it for later. For now, wait inside for me. I'll be right there."

Kei came closer, and in just a few words he whispered in Aileen's ear, "...It's been only a day, but this..."

—Is not a game.

† † †

Part 2

Now clean, Kei sat down on a chair and suddenly began to speak, 『Now then, where to start.』

They were in the furthest room in the village leader's house.

Kei and Aileen were the only ones in there at the moment. He told the others that he wanted to speak with her and they left the two alone.

Aileen sat cross-legged on the bed and cocked an eyebrow when Kei began to speak.

『...Why are we speaking in Esperanto?』

『I don't want us to be overheard. *It's just in case*³,』 Kei shrugged.

『So we're using it as a code.』

『Exactly. Besides English, this is the only language we both know. Just use English for words that you don't know.』

『Alright. By the way, can you use magic?』

3 It's just in case[2]: Spoken in English (most conversation is in English, but this chapter there's a lot of Esperanto!)

『Yeah,』 Kei affirmed her question. 『It seems that spirits are here too. But, the energy drain from using magic is heavy. It definitely uses your life force. I was close to fainting. Now I realize what it meant when they said that you'd die if your mana ran out.』

『That means you've used it already?』

『...Yeah. Just a little.』 He averted his eyes.

Aileen wanted to ask him what he used it for, but he didn't look like he would answer, so she gave up.

『——Well, let's leave the magic talk for later. The problem right now is *this world*.』 Kei stared directly at Aileen and forced the conversation in a different direction. 『I've come to the conclusion that this isn't the game world, but rather a world similar to Demondal.』

『...Mhm.』

『The reason is... Well, there's a few. It feels too real. Sweat, blood, and everything else has every little detail replicated. Also I don't think that the NPCs—rather, this world's inhabitants' behavior is AI. So on and so forth.』

『Hey, Kei. What actually happened last night?』 Aileen asked, looking a little worried.

Kei gave a light sigh. 『Let's see...』

He summarized his flight while carrying Aileen, the fight against the Hound Wolves, the use of the potion to treat her wounds, and finally their arrival at Tahfu.

『In other words, you went right into a village that just suddenly showed up and one you've never seen nor heard of? ... That's quite risky, don't you think?』

『Yeah... Sorry.』 He had no rebuttal.

『Sorry, I'm not trying to criticize you. It just didn't seem very Kei-like... What happened after that?』 Aileen pressed him for the rest.

Kei explained how she stayed at the village leader's home and how they discovered that the problem was poison. He then told her that in order to determine what type of poison it was, he launched a counter-attack on the bandits.

Aileen's face clouded over. 『The bandits... You killed them, didn't you?』

『Yeah... Some of them, anyway.』

『Okay...』 she said while lost in thought with her head down and a meek expression.

Kei didn't know how to respond.

It wasn't like he wanted her to feel grateful. It was the decision that he arrived at, and to him, it was the best choice. Nothing can change what's already been done. He didn't want Aileen to feel guilty about his decisions.

He wanted to convey that to her, but he didn't know how to say it. Even if he did, it probably wouldn't change how she felt.

While he was thinking, Aileen suddenly lifted her head, 『Um... Kei.』

『Hm? What is it?』

She stared at him with her wavering blue eyes and gave a shy, clumsy smile. 『...Thank you. For saving me.』

Her words pierced right through him. 『...What's with that. Well, you know—』

Kei smiled and scratched his cheek; a reaction out of character for him. No matter how he floundered, she would still worry about him, huh. Nonetheless, he was able to calm down a little, but he still had no reply.

I'm certainly a selfish bastard, Kei thought.

Kei folded his arms and reclined in his chair imperiously, 『—Praise me more!』

『Woah, your ego suddenly grew!』

Aileen reeled back exaggeratedly, and when their eyes met they both chuckled.

『At any rate, for those reasons, I believe that this isn't a game.』

『I didn't truly think that this was a game, either.』 Aileen shrugged slightly. 『With development, replicating reality like this in VR could be possible. But, it's a little hard to believe that it would happen so suddenly,』 she had a distant look as she grumbled and roughed up the sheets.

『I suppose so... And unlike the game, it looks like there isn't any reviving in this 'world'. Of course. Of fucking course not, but...』

For argument's sake, if anyone could respawn in this world then killing would be a much lighter matter. However, judging from the villagers' and bandits' reactions, that didn't seem to be the case. Everyone—absolutely everyone, felt the same about death.

『Oh... Then we'll have to do our best to not die...』 Aileen muttered seriously as she stared at the scenery out the window.

Kei couldn't help but think that such an obvious thing was a little strange.

“...Hm?”

The sound of footsteps shuffling closer came from the other side of the door.

“—Kei-dono. It’s Anka.”

“Oh, it’s just Anka.” Kei stood up from his chair and opened the door, inviting the old woman with her walking cane inside.

“My apologies, did I interrupt something important?”

“No, no, we just finished talking—Aileen, this is Anka, the village shaman. The one who took care of you the entire time you were sleeping.”

“Nice to meet you, it looks like I was quite a bother. Thank you.”

“Not at all, please don’t worry about it.”

“Not at all, please don’t worry about it.” She smiled at Aileen’s manners and murmured, “...How beautiful.” She stared at Aileen with the tiny eyes buried in her wrinkled face. Her eyes shone with curiosity like that of a child.

As Kei helped her into a chair, Anka offered a bag to him.

“Kei-dono. Here are the potions you left with me.”

“Oh, thanks.” He smiled slightly as he took the bag, remembering the potions they lost. Out of habit, he checked the contents. Inside were a handful of full bottles and one half-empty bottle. It wasn’t a terrible loss.

“Looks like the Tanuki kept his paws out of the cookie jar.”

“...Tanuki?”

“I meant Bennett.” Kei couldn’t resist telling her. If they were left with Bennett, some would definitely be gone. “Speaking of him, he told me that you treated my cheek. Thank you, again.”

“It’s no problem at all. It was a salve that I made, so it’s not nearly as effective as a potion.... Should I have used a potion?”

“No, that would’ve been a waste. I’m grateful for the treatment.”

A potion would have healed a wound this small in an instant, but it could also be used to treat fatal wounds. A salve, on the other hand, wouldn’t be able to heal something fatal. He wanted to express his honest gratitude for her understanding the importance of preserving the potions.

“Your praise is undeserved... Now then, Kei-dono.” She cleared her throat and sat up straight. “It is shameful, but I have two favors to ask of you.”

“...What are they?” Kei’s expression sobered.

He had only appreciation for this sincere and courteous old woman and he still owed her for taking care of Aileen, so if she wanted help with something then he wanted to do all he could.

But, that depended on the request, of course.

“...The first one is about the potions.” It was difficult to say, but she still said it clearly.

So that was one of them, Kei thought to himself.

Even Aileen, who was left out of the conversation, wore an expression that said, *makes sense*.

“Injury and illness; they kill people. Death is the inevitable fate of nature—but it’s different when a newborn child has its last breath taken by a fever...” Anka slid off of her chair and prostrated. “This year, there are three women that are expecting. I don’t know how many of their children will survive and grow up. Kei-dono, I know how valuable such a cure-all medicine is, and I would give anything for it. However, please, could you spare even a small portion? Even only enough to save the life of a weak newborn...?”

“Please stop, Anka.” Anka had her forehead pressed to the ground, and Kei helped her back up into her seat.

Kei let out a stressed sigh while she folded her arms and hung her head shamefully, looking very weak.

—The potions are their lifeline.

Even in the game, the materials and equipment needed to make High Potions were high class, causing them to be very rare. From the looks of the people in this world, the rarity of potions was even higher, and he didn’t even know the means to acquire them now.

—He had to choose between being carried away by his emotions or favoring his and Aileen’s lives. There was no need to think. The conclusion came naturally.

“...I’m sorry, Anka,” he said quietly as he let his head fall. “This... We want to hold on to these.”

After hearing this, Anka slowly shook her head with a pained expression. “No... From the beginning, I knew. It isn’t something that we would be able to pay for... Please don’t mind it, Kei-dono. It was just a request from a senile old woman.”

“Sorry...” His feelings of remorse only grew with her sportsman-like conduct. But, he held out.

The room fell into silence. With miraculous timing, before the silence could steep, Aileen asked, “...Then, what about the second favor?”

“Oh, yes... The other request may also be impudent, but,” she brightened up a little bit and looked at Aileen and Kei. “I would be honored if you could teach me the Spirit’s language⁴.”

4 Spirit’s language: This is Esperanto, but to people other than Kei and Aileen it’s the language of the spirits.

Kei and Aileen exchanged looks.

“...What do you mean?”

“It’s embarrassing to say, but even as the village shaman, I have little competence with the language of the Spirits. Our village hands down a text on the matter, but I don’t know if it’s even correct.” Then, cautious of anyone else being around, she whispered, “...To tell the truth, no matter how many prayers I recite for my patients, I don’t think there is any effect. I doubt whether or not the wording itself is right...”

“That’ll be easy to do if that’s all,” Kei carelessly answered. This request was small compared to the potions.

“Truly?! Thank you so much...”

Anka looked like she was about to prostrate herself again so Kei and Aileen quickly stopped her.

† † †

Part 3

After Kei ended his lesson on Esperanto with Anka, Aileen said she was hungry. He asked Cynthia to take care of her again before leaving the house. Bennett had yet to come back. He was most likely out playing with his granddaughter, Jessica, like he promised.

Kei corrected her prayers’ wording, and while he was at it, taught her some helpful verbs, commands, and what kinds of catalysts spirits preferred. She looked ghastly, but she wrote it all down on paper before going home while sobbing with gratitude.

As her teacher, he was glad that she was overjoyed, but honestly he felt conflicted. He had no idea how effective the ‘ritual magic’ would be without a contracted spirit, even if her Esperanto was perfect.

In ritual magic and other magic, the user conveys their desired goal to the Spirit through their language. Success depends on the magic power and the catalyst offered, that fact doesn’t change.

With regular magic, the user’s contracted spirit would answer their call; the difference with ritual magic was that the user wouldn’t know if there was a spirit around, but they would ask anyway.

Simply put, ritual magic was unreliable.

Spirits existed everywhere, yet they existed nowhere. For example, Kei’s contracted spirit, 『Maiden of the Wind』, could manifest anywhere the wind blew.

She was a single gust of wind, yet she was the whole atmosphere. The 『Maiden of the Wind』's actual name, 『Siv』, was only known to those contracted with her. Originally, she would be aware of all of them as long as the wind could reach them, but to Kei, she seemed to only be aware of him.

There was no reason for her to pay heed to just one human's request in such a vast expanse of awareness.

Furthermore, other than using ritual magic to attract a spirit, it was even more important to create a space *that the spirit preferred*. The problem was that Kei unfamiliar with the process behind this.

The NPCs only hinted at the preparation and wording in the game. The player was never actually able to set up an area. Therefore, Kei couldn't even begin to guess how to do it.

That was why Kei taught Anka the catalysts that lower ranked and easier to manifest spirits preferred, which he learned from consulting an NPC.

...I suppose it's better than nothing, he thought as he walked the village's main path.

Anka thought that as long as she offered a catalyst and prayed properly in the Spirit language then a spirit might come.

Kei just wanted her to think of it as slightly increasing the odds, but after he saw how reliant she was, he started to feel a little guilty that it might not meet her expectations. As he thought of that he reached the center plaza in the village.

It was the only cobble-stoned place in Tahfu.

At the center of it was a well that served as a mainstay for their daily needs such as doing laundry and providing drinking water. But, now all the equipment taken from the bandits was laid out across the stone in an organized fashion.

Those that had nothing to do stood around and watched.

The boys' and men's eyes shone at the sight of all the rare weapons and armor. The faces of the women said, *boys will be boys*, as they looked at the men and carried baskets of laundry.

Cronen, Mandel, and the rest of the retrieval team still seemed unable to join in the excitement as they were still weighed down by the memories of the bodies.

"Oh, Kei-dono. Have you already finished your talk?" Danny stopped checking the equipment, giving an insincere smile.

"Yeah. How's your side?"

“Fantastic. The Ignaz bandits’ equipment is as good as expected.” He rubbed his hands together, trying to get on Kei’s good side.

“Alright.”

Kei nodded calmly and then glanced at the long swords lined up on the ground.

...They arranged them so the best ones wouldn’t get taken, huh.

He looked to make sure the sword he had his eye on earlier; the one with the highest quality, was still there. It was just a feeling, but there seemed to be too few swords on the ground. Most likely, while he was speaking with Aileen *someone* took them *somewhere*. Kei smiled bitterly as such thoughts ran through his head.

When he saw the leather armor next to the swords, his expression suddenly changed.

—Eight. Eight chest pieces.

“What is it, Kei-dono?”

“...Danny-dono. I want to ask one thing. Is this all the armor that was recovered?”

“Wha—Yes, this should be it. Precisely eight sets, the same as the number of bodies.”

“I...see...”

—There’s not enough.

Kei realized, albeit late, but he definitely fought ten bandits yesterday.

—*Did two of them escape?* He thought as he fought to keep anything from showing on his face.

He considered taking Sasuke and riding back out to the plains to do one more check, but stopped when he saw Danny looking at him curiously.

This stubborn man would have never overlooked extra bodies, so he shouldn’t accuse him yet.

...At least give me something of the ones who got away. If I even had just one of their knives, I could 『Track』 them.

Kei stood in front of the orderly equipment, quietly contemplating. “Hmm...”

He only had one more emerald, which was a necessary catalyst for his magic. If he had their armor or weapons, then based on the 『scent』, he could find them with 『The Maiden of the Wind』 as long as they were in a location where the wind blew.

However, he didn’t know which items were theirs. He didn’t have enough mana or catalysts to just randomly try.

Kei rubbed his chin and thought it over, ignoring Danny's questioning look. He suddenly broke the silence, "...Okay. Regarding the spoils..." He walked over to the longsword he was eyeing earlier and slowly picked it up.

Shiiing, he pulled it out of the scabbard. Its weight felt good in his hand. The blade was the right thickness, it was around eighty centimeters long, and it looked like it could cut rather well. He swung it around one-handed to try it out.

It made a swoosh sound as it cut through the air.

The noisy crowd fell silent as soon as he started.

...It's fast, Cronen thought, wide-eyed after just one swing.

...It's perfect. Mandel contemplated Kei's limitless strength; the sword stopped perfectly with proper form.

"Danny-dono."

"Y-yes?"

"I'll take this sword and the silvers we recovered," with the sword still drawn, Kei stated in a tone that said he wasn't going to wait for approval. "In exchange, I'll give you everything else. You have all helped me quite a lot anyway. Sound good?"

"Wha-?!" Danny went wide-eyed with surprise, because such a proposal was unprecedented. The silver itself was a large sum, but if they sold off the armor, accessories, and everything else, then the income would be an even greater sum. Even the villagers around them stirred and let out surprised sounds.

"O-of course! Absolutely!!"

"Good... By the way, it might just be me, but it feels like there aren't enough swords here. Is the blacksmith still working on their repairs? It doesn't really matter, but I hope that you don't *miscount* the coins, Danny-dono."

With Kei's devious smile, Danny smiled and his face paled slightly as his cheeks reddened.

Kei looked up at the sky, dyed by the sunset, and gave a small sigh. "...I'm still a bit tired today. Sorry, but can I leave the rest to you?"

"S-sure."

"Thanks. I'll be heading back to your place Danny-dono, excuse me."

He turned around and began walking the path back, his sword clinking as he put it back in its scabbard.

...Not taking the other gear is a bit of a waste, but I don't have the time to sell it all.

According to Danny and the others, in about a week, peddlers would be coming by.

It would be ideal if they could sell all the equipment and replace the money they took from the bandits. It could be bad if some of the bandits did get away.

The enemy was a bandit group whose name was known throughout the region. Based on their skills in the fight last night, Kei thought they mustn't have been part of the main force. If that was the case—there was a strong chance they'd want revenge.

That equipment... the rings... they could be trouble.

He could take some easy-to-carry items, but the rings had a strange design to them which worried him.

If those rings are the group's mark then I might end up being the one that's 『Tracked』 ...

It wouldn't be strange for a large group to have one or two magicians.

Even so, saying, 'I'll just take those strange looking rings,' would be too suspicious. So, the only other choice was to give all the accessories to Danny and them.

...Oh well, the silver and the sword isn't a bad profit. When Aileen is back to normal, we'll leave the village.

In his right hand, Kei gripped the scabbard with force.

The bright forest was now dyed with thick darkness by the twilight.

Uneasy, Kei ran back to the house Aileen waited in without a word.

Chapter 14 – Hunter

Part 1

The wind carried the sound of rustling leaves over the open land.

The plains. Green land that extended as far as the horizon.

Small fluffy clouds drifted across the beautiful, endless blue sky.

...Sure is peaceful, thought Kei ambiguously as he scanned the area with a sweeping gaze from atop Sasuke.

The scenery was gentle and relaxing. Very relaxing.

However, something in his chest felt like it was smoldering with unease.

That feeling coiled around inside him, prickling at his heart.

The calm wind blew once again, but Kei's heart was still clouded.

Then, in the corner of his vision he saw a small brown figure squirming about in the bushes. "... Found it," murmured Kei.

Mandel sat on his horse next to Kei, and at Kei's words his expression showed his amazement, "Again...? You're too fast." He smiled dryly. Tied to his saddle was a rabbit already drained of blood.

Kei lightly kicked Sasuke's flanks and nocked an arrow on his bow.

Whistle.

The rabbit perked its ears up and poked its head out of the brush at the sudden sharp sound, looking around to see what the noise was. Then the arrow stabbed through it.

It let out a short squeak before dying and all of its nearby friends took off at full speed.

"Got it."

"The wind's blowing, you know... How—well, at this distance it's doable." Mandel put his hand to his brow and sighed at Kei's nonchalant report, lamenting his pride.

They rode their horses forward and picked up the rabbit, laying on its back as if its feet were kicking the sky.

"Sorry about that," Kei said as he pulled the arrow from its torso, causing blood to spurt out. Right away, Mandel pulled out a knife and cut its throat.

As Kei watched the blood gushed out and spilled onto the ground, in his hands he felt the warmth of the tiny creature fade away.

“...This should be good enough.”

Mandel took the rabbit from Kei, “Yeah... We should head back to the village,” he said as he looked over the plains while tying the rabbit to the saddle.

It was now morning. The bandits came to Kei’s mind. Originally, they were supposed to already be gone from the village.

But for some reason—he was rabbit hunting in the plains.

† † †

Last night, when Kei realized that some of the bandits got away he thought of what to say to her as he made his way back to the village leader’s house.

Without knocking, he opened the door and walked into the living room, “Hey, Aileen, I have—“

“Onee-chan, open wide~.”

“Mmm~, this is really good!”

“Careful Jessica, it’s going to spill.”

“Aileen-sama, there is plenty more, so please eat as much as you’d like.”

“Oh, thanks!”

Bennett wore a warm expression while Jessica sat on Aileen’s lap and fed her dinner and Cynthia stared at the three of them affectionately. They looked like a family, happily sitting around the table—

“Ah, Kei! Welcome back!”

She had bread crumbs stuck to the corner of her mouth, and with her innocent smile Kei was at a loss for words.

“Welcome back. Kei-sama, would you like to eat as well? You probably haven’t eaten yet.”

“Y-yeah... Thanks.”

Urged on by Cynthia, Kei sat down across from Aileen. Next to him, Bennet noticed the sword at his side, but looked away and didn’t say anything. It looked like as long as his granddaughter was there he would rather play the grandfather than the calculating village leader.

...I guess he can't say anything about it in this situation anyway. For now, I'll just accept her offer, Kei thought to himself. He realized how tense he was and gave a small sigh.

"Here you go. I hope you like it," she said as she smiled and indicated at the plates on the table. It was vegetable soup with biscuits and pickled pork that was warmed up by the fire.

"Kei, Cynthia's soup is amazing!"

It was a simple meal, but it was nutritionally balanced. Its sweet fragrance filled his nose.

Even so, he still had absolutely no appetite.

Kei crammed the food into his mouth without really wanting to and without savoring the flavor. He was moved not by feelings like, it would be rude to not eat, but rather, he needed to eat while he could.

Cynthia quickly cleaned up the dishes and then left to take Jessica over to Cronen's house. Now the only ones left in the room were Kei, Aileen, and Bennett.

"Village leader, of the goods from the bandits, I've been given this sword and the silvers. In exchange, your village can have everything else."

"Ho... Well now." Hearing Kei's offer Bennett looked surprised and then stroked his beard while he murmured, "That's a good deal..." But rather than happiness, his eyes held suspicion. *Why would Kei give me such a deal?* Bennett tried to figure out the motive behind it.

"The village has done a lot to help us out. This is the least we can do," without exaggerating too much Kei lied through his fake smile. 'The truth, it's cheap in comparison to our lives,' sounded worse.

"...You're too generous." He nodded, perhaps he was persuaded by Kei's show of good will.

Aileen interrupted, "Wait a sec Kei, don't you think only taking the sword and coins is too generous? Stuff like armor would be too bulky, but shouldn't we take some things like arrows or everyday items?"

"..."

He had already secretly taken some of the higher quality arrows during the retrieval, but she was right about the everyday items.

With a troubled expression Kei looked at Bennett, who seemed to be choking down a laugh. "Oh my. This young lady has her head on straight, doesn't she, Kei-dono?"

"...Yeah."

"Although I do understand your feelings. How about we just say it's part of your profits?"

“...Thanks.” Kei lowered his head sincerely. It was only natural to be embarrassed after exclaiming with a cocky look that he would only be taking the sword and money.

Kei’s expression caused Aileen to burst out laughing, and even Bennett smiled sympathetically as he tried to hold back his own laughter.

A peaceful quietness fell over them once the waves of laughter died down.

Aileen rested her chin on the table and muttered, “From here on... what should we do?”

“Actually, about that,” Kei spoke up, as if he’d been waiting for it to come up. “I was thinking that we should go to Urvan.”

“...Wai-, Urvan exists!?” Aileen accidentally yelled, but when she looked at Bennett she quietly gasped and clasped her hands over her mouth.

Other than raising an eyebrow a little, Bennett didn’t show much of a response.

The word *exists* may come off as slightly strange for the people of this world.

“Village leader. I’m sorry, but would we be able to see the map?”

“Yes, of course.”

Kei took the map that Bennett pulled out and showed it to Aileen. He explained Tahfu, Urvan, Kitene, and other geographical points as well as the map being ten times the scale of the game’s map.

Fixated on the map, Aileen put a finger to her lips thoughtfully. “I see...”

“In my opinion, we should leave early tomorrow morning and head toward Urvan. What do you think, Aileen?”

He’d successfully grabbed her attention.

If he kept pushing her and didn’t tell her the real reason, they might be able to get out of here soon. But, his expectations were betrayed.

“...Sorry, Kei. But the truth is, well,” she looked apologetic, “—I can’t really use any of my strength.”

Kei stiffened.

With that, they concluded they would stay in the village for another day or two.

She wasn’t in pain and her mind had cleared up completely, but perhaps due to the after-effects of the poison, she felt heavy and tired easily since her strength hadn’t returned to her. Thanks to this, they were forced to stay longer.

“If possible, I’d like to rest a little longer. If we went like this, then I’d just be pulling you down, Kei...”

“So that’s how it is...”

In the bedroom, Aileen was lying on the bed with a downcast expression.

They were left alone in the dimly lit room. Kei was unsure of what to do.

Aileen even had to steady herself by using the wall as she weakly shuffled her way from the living room to the bedroom. With one look Kei saw her condition was still serious. Right now, her physical strength was worse than that of a normal person. After a few steps she became uneasy. Jessica might even win out in terms of strength.

Originally, I planned for both of us to ride Sasuke, but if we had to fight someone then it would be problematic if Aileen couldn’t move on her own. She wouldn’t be able to fight or even go and hide somewhere, Kei thought.

Leaving was too much of a risk in her current state.

Of course, it would be better to leave before the bandits counter-attacked the village, but her rest was also necessary.

Leaving tomorrow would be too tough, I suppose. Kei sighed and gathered his thoughts. “—That’s how it is.” He raised his head and smiled brightly. “Well, let’s just see how it is after one or two days. Staying in bed for almost a whole day must have weakened your body. It might even be a side effect of the potions. Just rest up and you’ll be better in no time.”

“Y-yeah.” Aileen blinked in surprise at his suddenly positive attitude. “...Well, I guess you’re right! I’ll rest and get better soon! With that, I’m going to bed, Kei!” She smiled and slid the covers up to her face.

—For now, he’d leave the matter of the bandits aside.

That’s what he decided.

They may get caught up in the attack, but there was no point in worrying Aileen. If she did worry then it may slow her recovery, too.

Therefore, he wouldn’t make her worry. While he justified it with good intentions, he knew that the decision was actually for his own selfish reasons.

...Well she should just focus on getting better. I don’t know what will happen from here on out anyway.

He patted Aileen’s head and then stood up.

“I’ll be heading back to Cronen’s house... Good night.”

“Okay, good night.”

Kei blew out the candle and placed his hand on the door knob before spinning around. He suddenly remembered something.

“Oh yeah, Aileen. I forgot to ask since the old woman came here, but it’s about magic. You have some catalysts, right?”

“Huh...? Before we came here I had plenty to use, at least. But can we really use magic?”

“Let me have them. You can’t use them now anyway, right?” He shrugged and stared at Aileen. “Once you get better you should try it. When you say plenty, how many is that? How many times could you use 『Manifest』?”

“『Manifest』, huh... That uses quite a few... With all the catalysts and my mana, it should be around twice.”

“...I see. Well, I guess that’s how it is.”

In other words, they could use 『Track』 two times. Including what Kei had, three times.

Though we would be better off preserving the catalysts...

Even if he tried to 『Track』 the bandits that got away, it was highly unlikely that he would guess which equipment was theirs out of all the items gathered. Aileen’s catalysts were easier to obtain than Kei’s emeralds, but they weren’t something you could find in a small village. It would be better to hold onto them rather than gamble them away.

“Why did you suddenly want to ask about catalysts anyway?” Aileen tilted her head.

Kei gave a half smile and lied, “We haven’t decided on the route, even though we said we were going to Urvan. I was just thinking of things to prepare and it came across my mind.”

“...Oh, okay.” Persuaded, Aileen looked up and yawned before she fell onto her side. “Good night... Kei.”

“...Good night. Aileen.”

Kei closed the door.

Part 2

Kei made his way back to Cronen’s house.

He briefly greeted everyone before he closed himself off in his small room and began to quietly don his chainmail.

Tonight should be okay, I think... He thought as he tightened a belt over the gambeson⁵ and then put on his leather armor.

Kei didn't know where the two bandits had escaped to, but they would have needed more than just one day to regroup with their main forces and launch a counter-attack. Even if they wasted no time in readying their forces, he couldn't see them attacking in broad daylight.

The fastest they would come would be tomorrow night. Kei considered any time after that to be dangerous.

At least the villagers have watchmen at night...

The villagers were still on alert for Hound Wolves, whether they were coming or not. The men took shifts to keep watch and keep the fires lit, which also prepared them for an attack.

So even if they come at night, Kei pulled his leather gloves on tight and scowled into the darkness, we should be able to escape while the villagers fight.

If they surrounded the village, the night would be Kei's ally. He could easily break through with his bow if he used the other villagers as decoys.

It wouldn't be difficult—

"...Damn it." Kei shook his head as if it would shake off the gloom. He threw his cloak onto his back and donned his helmet.

He fastened his quiver to his lower back. All he needed to be fully armed was his bow.

With his armor on and bow in hand he slowly sat down on the shabby bed and let out an exasperated sigh.

The wood creaked behind him as he leaned his weight against the wall and closed his eyes.

It was quiet.

Kei sat in the darkness and a thought crossed his mind, *I might be worrying over nothing anyway...*

His battle at night with the bandits danced across his eyelids, but it already felt like a distant memory.

I wanted them all dead.

He felt the gloves against his palms. He thought he'd killed every one of them with either his bow or his sword. He believed the wounds were unmistakably fatal. The two that escaped were lucky to be breathing at all. Whether they were grievously wounded or on the verge of death—they were certainly in bad shape.

⁵ Gambeson: The cloth worn with chainmail to help absorb impact.

There are beasts in both the plains and the forest; they may not have even made it out...

Those two would have difficult moving about while injured. The scent of their blood could attract a pack of wolves, in which case they would most likely die.

...It'd be nice if nothing happened.

Slowly, Kei's mind grew hazy. He entered a cycle of nodding off and waking up.

The faint twilight peeked through the window. Before he knew it, morning had come. "...So they didn't come." He gave a small sigh of relief.

Even though he felt fatigued, he wasn't in the mood to take a nap. All he wanted was a breath of fresh air. He forced his sluggish body up and out the door.

Immediately, he ran into Cronen, who had his farming tools in hand. Kei's dark eyes were dull and he was fully armored.

With an unsure and puzzled expression Cronen asked him, "...It's pretty early. What's with your outfit?"

The sky was dimly lit, as the sun had yet to break the horizon. Even so, a farmer must get up early to prepare for work.

Somewhere in his jaded heart he was impressed with Cronen's hard work as he thought of how to explain himself. In his drowsy state, it felt as if it was someone else's problem.

"—I thought I would go hunting in the plains or something," Kei replied, glancing at the bow in his right hand.

"...Isn't that a lot of armor?"

With a straight face he said, "Yeah. This is normal," and quickly left.

Kei headed toward the stable where Sasuke was being kept. He led Sasuke away from the hay he was eating and the workhorses that he slept next to, and left the village.

He thought to himself that he may as well grasp the lay of the land while he hunted, and as he came out of the grove of trees, he heard hooves from behind him.

"Hey~, Kei!" Mandel came right after him, riding one of the town work horses. "I heard from Cronen, you're going hunting?" He looked Kei straight in the eye, who slowed down to ride side by side, and asked, "Mind if I come?"

After Kei took down some rabbits while they rode around the plains to learn the area, he and Mandel turned back toward the village.

The sound of their horses' hooves synchronized as they slowly entered the grove.

"Hm..." Mandel let out a groan as he swayed on his horse, holding his unused bow in one hand. "You're really good... Usually it would take more time to hunt this many rabbits."

The rabbits lightly bounced against the saddle.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah... Usually, anyway." Mandel shrugged his shoulders slightly at Kei's indifferent attitude.

Rabbits were not easy animals to hunt in the plains. To start, it was hard to find them. Even though there were a lot of them, their small bodies made it difficult to spot them in the tall grass.

Even assuming they were spotted, bringing them down with a bow was tough. The rabbits that dwelled in the plains were extremely cowardly, running away the moment they realized something larger than them was approaching.

According to Mandel, traps were used much more often than bows to catch rabbits that lived in the plains.

"With marksmanship like this you'd be popular as a soldier or hunter... Even if you only hunted, you would be able to live easily."

"...I wonder."

"You easily could. Kei, this is great... Any time you wanted to, you could support a family with your skills."

"I see... A family, huh." Mandel's words caused Kei to lift his head up. "Do you have a family, Mandel?"

"I have two daughters that I live with. When my wife gave birth to my second daughter, she caught a fever and passed away..."

"Sorry to hear that..." said Kei apologetically.

"No, no, it's fine. This happened ten years ago," he waved his hand to show that he didn't mind. "My mother died from a disease that spread a year before I married. My father was a healthy, active huntsman up until last year, but," he stroked his beard and quietly stared into the forest, "One day, after he said he'd take a quick look around, he left for the forest and never came back. We couldn't find a single trace of him, not even a bone... Well, I suppose it isn't that rare for the forest to swallow someone up. He's probably dead."

"O-oh."

“Well, that’s my story. What about you?”

“My family...” The topic brought a distant look to Kei’s eyes as he rode. How many years had it been since he last saw his family? “I have a mom, a dad, and a little brother. We’re just a normal family.”

Mandel looked skeptical. “A normal family, huh?”

“Yeah,” Kei nodded emotionlessly.

‘Ordinary’ was a word that fit his family perfectly. Of course, Kei felt that he was the only one that didn’t fit into his ‘normal’ family. His father was a slightly timid salaryman and his mother worked part time and took care of the house.

His little brother would shut himself inside all day if he could. One day he said, ‘If I was like my older brother, then I’d be able to play game as much as I’d like,’ and Kei freaked out at him. They hadn’t stayed in contact since then and Kei had no idea how they were doing now.

“Hey, Kei... Are you one of the plains people?” Mandel asked Kei after he gave it some thought.

“Ah—Well...”

Kei hadn’t yet thought of a cover story for that. He was forced to come up with something on the fly. If he went with his chosen birthplace during character creation then he could say he was one of the plains people.

However, Mandel interpreted Kei’s hesitation in a way that made him quickly take back his question, “It’s fine if you don’t want to answer. I’ll just think out loud. I don’t know why you’re dressed like the plains people...but, since you don’t have the tattoo on your face you couldn’t have undergone their coming of age ceremony. I think you’re an outcast.”

Kei reached his hand to his face subconsciously. As he did, he remembered the tattoos that the plains people NPCs had on their faces.

Mandel took a sideways glance at Kei, who silently urged Mandel on with his eyes.

“This happened ten-some odd years ago. Perhaps to show their allegiance, the plains people caused conflict with the group governing the Dalhia plains region, Urvan’s Kraus... A lot of the people in the plains got caught up in it. Because of that, welcoming plains people is difficult.”

“...Okay.”

“Things were settled, but there still seems to be some conflict amongst tribes, and I’ve heard that some plains people pretend to be bandits to get by. They also don’t take hostages, so it’s easy to be resented. So... If I were to head toward Ri’leir, I would be careful to not look like a plains person.”

“...I see.” Kei believed him. It explained the high alert and hostility the villagers displayed when he first showed up.

Kei wore a lot of plains person-like armor because that was his character’s birthplace, and because he told his leatherworking friend that he liked the design.

He liked the uniqueness of the design and the feather decorations, but it was a different matter if it gave off a bad impression.

“In that case... would it be better to remove the feathers?”

“Yeah, I think then you would look much... better, I suppose. I think that your helmet is fine as it is though.”

Various parts of his leather armor, especially his shoulder pads, had ornaments that gave off an exotic feel. If he removed just these then he would probably look much simpler.

“...Also, take off your face mask, it’s way too suspicious.”

“I-I guess you’re right.”

The face mask gave him a small advantage in battle, where his opponent couldn’t read his facial expression, but for traveling it might be better to leave it off. Kei sighed lightly, there was a lot to consider. He never expected the people here to hate the plains people.

“Thank you, Mandel. I didn’t know about that.”

“I thought so... Don’t mention it.”

“...We weren’t hiding our birthplace intentionally, Aileen and I have a bit of a special circumstance. It’s not that we can’t explain it, it’s just difficult. Sorry.”

“That’s fine... Like I said, don’t mention it,” Mandel waved his hand

His kind warning to Kei, a stranger, hurt.

The bandits briefly came to mind. His inexpressible guilt grew in his heart.

Mandel looked at Kei, whose face showed traces of his anguish.

“...That’s right. Kei, I have a favor to ask of you.”

“W-what is it?”

“Your bow... Can I touch it?”

“Sure, no problem.” Kei handed Dragon Stinger to Mandel, whose stare was filled with interest.

The moment Mandel touched it his hands jumped up. “Ho...” he muttered and stared in wonder at the deceptive lightness of the bow.

“Guh...” He tried to draw the bow, but despite the weight, the bowstring was unexpectedly hard to pull back. The bow creaked. He drew it as far as his chest, but his face was red and he couldn’t hold it. He slowly released the tension in the bowstring.

“What a draw weight. I definitely couldn’t use this... I thought it was going to cut off my fingers.”

“Well, it would cut into your flesh if you didn’t use gloves.”

The fingers used to draw the bowstring back suffer the most. Dragon Stinger’s draw strength was much stronger than that of a normal bow. In the game there was no sense of pain, so he used the bow barehanded until his fingers were ready to fall off. However, it was impossible to use it this way in reality.

“I’ve never seen such a light bow with such a heavy draw weight. This leather, too... Just what is this bow made out of?” Mandel’s voice was filled with admiration.

Kei rid himself of any feelings of guilt and forced a small smile, “The frame is made from the branch of an Elder Trent and the bowstring is a Wyvern’s tendon. The leather came from the membrane of a dragon’s wing.”

Mandel froze for a moment and took a second look at the bow. Timid, he slowly handed the bow back to Kei without a word.

“...Some pretty pricey stuff.”

“You believe me?”

“You don’t have a reason to lie to me now. Even if I thought it was a lie, this bow feels rather monstrous... Besides,” Mandel’s eyes took a distant look, “The Dragon Scale Mail armor that Krause wore and the color of the skin on this bow match exactly.”

“Krause is... a noble? Have you met him before?”

“No, I’ve only seen him from a distance... But this happened ten years ago.” He looked wistful, yet lonely at the same time. The corners of his mouth turned up in a small smile and he lightly shrugged. “At any rate, you’re pretty amazing, Kei. I can’t even begin to guess how much your bow is worth.”

He went on, “A warrior with a fully drawn vermillion dragon bow and a wind spirit by his side, huh. He appears in the twilight to subjugate the evil bandits in order to save a young, beautiful girl’s life... Sounds like something a bard would like.” He told it like a fairytale and quietly smiled to himself.

—But the reality wasn’t that pretty.

If he were the protagonist of some fairytale then he’d just continue on to defeat the evil boss.

“Oh, I suppose,” Kei broke the excitement. All he could do was smile stiffly.

Chapter 15 – Villagers

Part 1

It felt like it was sweltering. It felt overbearing.

If you had to describe the feeling, it would be unpleasant.

Still half asleep, Aileen shook *it* off. She roughly pushed it away and thought she heard a small, “Umph—”

“...Mmh.”

She opened her eyes a crack and saw the bare wooden beams across the ceiling. *Oh, I was sleeping.*

Slowly, she sat up in bed.

She mumbled to herself and drowsily looked around the room.

“...Oh, you’re up now.”

Her eyes met the plump, sweaty man who sat in front of the green door—Danny.

Shocked, her drowsiness completely disappeared.

Why is *he* here?

Some man she didn’t know was in the bedroom with her. Even if it was the home’s owner, it still made her feel uncomfortable. Then she remembered the thing she shoved away when she woke up. A chill ran down her spine.

Aileen wrapped the sheets around her as if to protect herself, silently staring at him with narrowed eyes. The color in her face drained even more and Danny said, “Wai-, breakfast is ready,” and quickly left the room.

The door closed behind him.

After a minute, she started to feel herself all over, making sure nothing was wrong.

—She was fine. There wasn’t anything particularly wrong.

“What’s with that guy?” She got goosebumps on her arms. “...So gross.” The gross feeling came instinctively. She wrapped her arms around herself.

Unable to calm herself down she looked around uneasily and happened to look outside.

The green forest gave her a small sense of calm and she suddenly thought, *I should go meet up with Kei.*

She got out of bed and put on the wooden shoes she'd been lent. The simple shoes didn't match her size, so her feet slid around in them. However, the wood was smoothed out, so they didn't feel bad.

Aileen didn't want to run into that greasy man if he was in the living room, so she climbed over the window sill and went straight outside.

Her shoes clacked against the dirt path as she walked in the soft sunlight.



I feel light now... she realized that she clearly felt much better than yesterday.

She should have realized when she climbed out the window, but now she could feel the strength in her legs.

A small smile snuck onto her face and she giggled to herself as she lightened her step. *Hmm, I wonder where Kei went. If I remember right, he was at the village leader's second son's place. Cronin, or Cronen, or something.*

She remembered that. Although, she had no idea where that was.

"...Umm." She wondered what to do and paced back and forth when she saw a group of women carrying baskets and leather bags coming from the center of town talking loudly.

The one at the front of the group took notice and called out to her. It was Cynthia with her gentle smile, "...Oh, Aileen-sama. Did something happen to bring you here?"

The others noticed her too, and stopped their chatter, quickly putting on polite expressions.

"I was on my way to see Kei, but... I don't know where he is," flustered, she avoided looking them in the eye.

Aileen felt a little embarrassed when she answered them honestly.

The women teased her innocence, "Oh, are you now~?"

Aileen felt even more embarrassed and her cheeks grew bright red.

"Ah, if it's Kei-dono then he's at my house!" A young, freckled woman waved her hand energetically.

"What's your name?"

"I'm Tina, Cronen's wife!" While she held a jar of water, the freckled woman—Tina gave a quick bow. She brought Aileen with her to her home, their shoes clacking along the way. The house was disappointingly close by. "It's small, but please," she invited Aileen in. "Kei-dono left early in the morning to go hunting, but it's the middle of the day now so I'd imagine he'll be back soon."

"Oh, alright." Aileen sat at the table in the living room and casually looked around. Like Tina said, it was small compared to the village leader's house. However, it was so clean that there wasn't even a speck of dust.

It'd even be fine to go barefoot she thought, as she clacked her wooden shoes together under the table to kill time. Tina looked busy as she went about her work, changing the water from the jar to a pot and lighting a fire underneath it.

"—I'm heating some water for tea, if you'd like some." Tina smiled and held some dried herbs in her hand.

“Sure. Thank you.” Aileen realized Tina was going through the trouble for her and slightly nodded, grateful.

They were quiet for a while. The fire crackled and popped.

Aileen spaced out with her head propped up by her hand, and of course, that came to mind.

That greasy man’s face crossed her mind, but was soon replaced by a skinny woman smiling lovingly.

“...Why did Cynthia-san get married?” She muttered to herself.

Cynthia and Danny. At least from appearances, they didn’t seem like a fitting couple. Danny didn’t seem that charming, and Cynthia was quite pretty. She was genuinely curious as to why Cynthia chose to marry Danny of all people.

“Ah~ ... My sister-in-law is a bit unfortunate, isn’t she?” Tina answered, looking triumphant.

“Unfortunate?”

“She wanted to marry someone else. It’s like she sold herself.”

“...What do you mean?” Aileen tilted her head slightly in interest.

Tina lowered her voice, indicating that the conversation doesn’t leave the room, “It’s something that happened almost ten years ago. My sister-in-law’s younger sister came down with a fever. The town had the medicine we needed, but it was much too expensive... Her family was poor and didn’t know what to do. That’s when that man,” she spoke those last words with spite, “—said, ‘If we were *related* I could save her...’ as he showed his money. He even knew that she had a lover!”

“W-wow, that’s...”

In other words, she threw away her lover to be at Danny’s side if it meant her sister would be saved.

Aileen groaned and furrowed her brow with an expression that said she regretted asking. “So... Did he save her sister?”

“...Yes. *That* time, he did.” Tina nodded, looking bitter. “Not even a month after she recovered, she was attacked by a group of wild animals and died.”

“My god.”

“And then he said, ‘What a waste of money,’ *while Cynthia was present*. That pig-faced bastard.”

“P-pig...”

She put it frankly, and she wasn’t wrong. Aileen’s face twitched, even though she was asleep she’d felt the same.

Since Tina called Cynthia her sister-in-law, that would make Danny her brother-in-law. Even so, she clearly hated him.

“You don’t like him, do you?”

“Of course not! Not a single person in this village does!” She put her hands on her hips and puffed her cheeks out angrily. “He puts other people to work like he’s in charge, and then he doesn’t even do his own work! He’ll just stay holed up in his home all day, and when he finally does come out it’s only so he can take a stroll or go have fun in another town. Furthermore, depending on who you talk to, they say he’s going to brothels. Even after he married by buying his wife... I do feel bad for my sister-in-law though. People say the reason she can’t have children anymore is divine punishment.” She sighed. “I feel depressed thinking that he might be the next village leader... They should just make my husband the leader.”

After she finished her rant, Aileen’s expression also turned bitter.

Matrimony brought by money. Hated by everyone. Frequented brothels.

Aileen’s impression of him was bad to start with, and now it was even worse. The thought of staying one more day in the village—the village leader’s house—made her feel uncomfortable.

“Um, Tina-san.”

“Yes?”

“The truth is, this is only between us,” Aileen lowered her voice and told Cynthia about that from earlier.

“What!?” Her eyes widened and her face paled when she heard that Danny was there. “W-w-were you okay!?”

“I think so... I don’t think anything else happened to me.”

“There wasn’t anything sticky or slimy on you, was there?!”

“I-I don’t think so...” She scowled and looked a little sick as she shook her head.

Tina sighed in relief and pressed her fingers against her temples, “I can’t believe that he would go for visitors, too...” Her brilliant eyes slowly fell onto the butcher knife in the kitchen. “Rather... That’s right. If I do that, then Cronen will be the village leader...”

“N-No! I just wanted to ask if I could stay somewhere else!” Aileen yelled in a panic after she saw the longing beginning to show in her eyes.

Tina smiled brightly as if to say, ‘Oh my, I was just kidding!’ Whether she was joking or serious, she seemed close to making a bad decision.

Then the door made a noise as it opened.

“Heey, Tina! Are you—huh?” Cronen entered the house. He was wiping his sweat on a towel in one hand and held a gardening sickle in the other. His gaze stopped and he blinked a few times at Aileen sitting in a chair in his living room. “Oh, she’s here...?”

“Perfect timing, dear! Listen to this, it’s terrible!” Her eyes gleamed and she shook her head before she ran up to him as quick as an animal pouncing on its prey and explained the situation. “—That’s what happened! This is your chance, dear!” Her breathing was rough, “Let’s spread what happened and end his shot at being the next village leader!”

Cronen remained silent and just looked up as if he was trying to weather a headache. He gave a small sigh and hit her on the forehead with the flat of his gardening sickle.

“Wha-!?”

“...Sorry, miss. Just wait here for a moment.”

He grabbed Tina by the arm, who had her hands to her forehead, groaning, and pulled her outside.

“Ye-, sure...” Aileen was left alone and slightly dumbfounded.

The sound of steam quietly escaping from the pot lid filled the room.

“...Oh, the water is done.”

† † †

Part 2

“Hey, that hurts! What are you doing?”

“Quiet down, don’t be so loud!”

It was outside. Tina, with a red forehead, was raising her voice. Cronen undauntedly scowled at her.

“Please, just don’t make a scene...!”

“Why not? This is a once in a lifetime chance!”

“Chance? It’s a chance?!” Cronen smiled dryly. “Forget the girl; that Kei is a monster! If we mess up who knows what he’d do to us!”

“We just put all the blame on that pig. It wouldn’t bother me if he was killed.”

“You...!” His face twitched when she said that. “Be that as it may, he’s still my brother!”

“I know! I love you, but I don’t like him. I hate him.” Tina looked away.

She still held a grudge from when Danny used to make fun of her. He would say that she smelled like a pig because she helped her parents raise their pigs as livestock. Even though it was regular farming, those insults were the reason she became such a clean freak.

“I know that you hate him. But these are different matters. If he died, who would succeed the village leader?!”

“...You! Who else could there be!?” Tina said in disbelief, her voice cracking and her cheeks flushing.

In contrast, Cronen appeared slightly annoyed, but also disheartened.

— It was impossible for him.

He hated knowing that he couldn’t do it.

Cronen was self-conscious of it. He could never replace Danny.

Although, it was true that Danny had many flaws.

To start off, the younger generation didn’t like him. He also sometimes lost all reason when dealing with women. On top of that he was a glutton, greedy, and a cheapskate. Truthfully, many of the villagers couldn’t stand his haughty attitude.

‘Even I might be fit to be the leader.’

‘In fact, everyone thinks that I would be better than Danny.’

Cronen had thought about it before. Maybe he got overconfident because his friends flattered him. Maybe it was the dislike he held for Danny that pushed him. Or maybe he was simply rebelling against his father recommending Danny and not him. In any case, once he grew up he decided to believe that he was best suited to be the village mediator.

However, he realized it when he first dealt with managing the village.

There was Danny, who studied books and spoke with merchants in the pursuit of knowledge since childhood.

Then there was himself, who abandoned study to run around the hills and fields with his friends.

His knowledge, his mental capacity—the gap was too large.

Of course, Cronen could still read, write, and perform arithmetic. Even though he was thrown out for slacking off, Bennett had still tied him to a chair and beat some lessons into him. He could do the minimum a village leader should be able to, such as calculate taxes or manage a ledger.

But in the end it was just the minimum. There were more important affairs that the representative of a village should be able to perform. For example, buying goods from merchants at a reasonable price. Also, selling the village's manufactured goods at a fair price. Or even making connections with people to accomplish the trade.

It all needed things that Cronen wasn't good at; knowledge, experience, and a quick wit. And yet Danny could do such a complicated job as easily as if he were a shopkeeper.

He saw it himself, his own worthlessness and the difference between his and his brother's abilities. It crushed him.

Furthermore, Danny didn't neglect making money either.

He analyzed information that he picked up from peddlers and overhead conversations to anticipate the prices and trends at the marketplace.

He also had other tasks such as regulating their crop planting, anticipating spikes in prices for goods so he could buy them ahead of time, and preparing medicine before a disease hit them—from Cronen's perspective, Danny's ability to interpret information was on an entirely different level.

One day, Danny muttered, 'I should've been born to a shopkeeper.' He certainly did have the skills for business. It was a pity. That talent was too good to waste simply as the leader of a rural village. Even Cronen felt it was a wonderful talent from the bottom of his heart.

If he wasn't the eldest son, or if Bennett hadn't taught him the responsibilities of being the next village leader, then maybe Danny would have left the village as a merchant long ago. But in reality, he stayed in Tahfu and thought about the village in his own way.

Compared to nearby villages, Tahfu was considered wealthy. They had good farming tools and luxuries like alcohol and sweets. When it really mattered, he procured various medicines in the event that someone fell ill or got injured. Many of the villagers lived through such matters thanks to him.

The villagers had mental and physical reassurance. However, Cronen knew that this abundance was because of Danny. Cronen personally saw him buying the goods with money that he earned.

The elderly who witnessed the change in leadership also knew it. There was a clear improvement in the standard of living since Bennett's time. But by no means was Bennett incompetent. Danny was simply better at earning money than Bennett was. Cronen accepted Danny's haughtiness and supported him for the village leader because he knew all of this.

"It's...impossible for me." Cronen slowly shook his head. "I can't replace my brother."

"Why?! You can do it. I can help, and everyone else says you're better for it—!"

“That’s not the issue.”

It was simple. He just lacked the ability. It didn’t matter how much Tina helped nor how cooperative the villagers seemed, the gap between himself and Danny couldn’t be closed.

Although, perhaps it would be best if Cronen posed as the village leader for the sake of his mediator role and Danny worked behind the scenes.

However, that would never happen. The reason Danny was still in Tahfu was to become the next village leader. Danny was brought up thinking that he would be the next village leader, and on occasion had accepted it as natural. It was a sense of responsibility, an understanding. The thought that, naturally, he should be the village leader, kept him here.

If that thought were to disappear, what would happen?

In all likelihood, Danny would leave the village. His pride wouldn’t allow him to work in his unsatisfactory younger brother’s shadow. He wasn’t too attached to the village in the first place, and with the connections and skills that he already had, he could easily make a living as a merchant.

Cronen saw no reason for him to stay.

If Danny left, the village would be left with only the unreliable Cronen.

The medicine and the alcohol would eventually be used up. The farming tools would someday need to be replaced.

When that time came, Cronen wouldn’t be able to come up with the money. Tahfu would inevitably fall to the same standard of living as the neighboring villages once again. They wouldn’t be poor, but neither would they be wealthy.

He had to do his best to avoid that—it was the right thing to do.

“I’ve said it countless times. Even if you helped, it wouldn’t be enough!”

“Why... Why do you have to say that!? You don’t know until you try!”

“Because I already know! Danny is much smarter than the two of us put together!!” Cronen grew indescribably irritated, yelling at Tina who contorted her face in frustration.

Tina probably thought that what her husband didn’t like the most was that the man she hated the most was superior to him. It most likely wasn’t just that Danny was superior, but that Cronen himself recognized it and couldn’t stand it. That’s why he lost his temper.

That was what frustrated Cronen the most.

The younger villagers, Tina included, couldn’t understand Danny’s achievements. They didn’t even try.

He was haughty. He worked people too hard. He didn't do any physical labor.

They were all bad points, but that was just the surface. No one tried to dig any deeper.

Even when Cronen tried to explain that Danny was more capable, they would get swept up in emotion and deny it.

'Even we could do it if we tried.'

'It can't be that hard.'

With no experience, no knowledge, and no basis they just let their emotions speak for them. Their childish ignorance made them beyond help. Even Cronen grew tired of it.

And so they just kept mocking Danny and his attitude, unable to comprehend him.

"Haa... That's enough. This conversation is over." Cronen flicked his hand from side to side and ended the conversation without further explanation.

—He was fine being the one to work in the shadows. He'd resolved himself to do so. As the village mediator he would listen to the younger generation's complaints and act as the intermediary between them and Danny.

He believed that was the best thing he could do for the village.

At the very least, Cronen wanted his beloved wife to understand—although, looking at her extremely displeased expression he lightly sighed again and shook his head.

"Tina... I know that you said that you wouldn't mind if my brother was killed. But if it came to that, you know that it might not stop with just his life, right? That's why we need to just peacefully apologize without excuses."

"Like I could just do that!"

"You idiot! Do you think you can just end it like that!? Even if that Kei demanded something ridiculous of us, do you think there is anyone in this village that could stand against him!? Even Mandel can't! Will you take the responsibility!?"

"That's..."

"If you get it then shut up... I'm going to go apologize to the girl. Danny...no, she probably doesn't want to even see him, but if she wants an apology from him then I'll make him... At any rate, we'll just have to hope that this is resolved peacefully. I wonder if anyone other than us has a room to spare..." Cronen brooded with his hands to his head.

Tina just silently stared, her gaze was full of spite. Then her gaze suddenly slipped past him. "Ah... They're back."

“What?” Cronen spun around. Kei and Mandel were riding through the entrance to the village on their horses. “Back already...”

What perfect timing, he thought and smiled dryly. He shifted his gaze between the two riding in side by side and Tina, sighing.

—*If only she could follow Mandel’s example*, he wished.

Mandel was a particularly reputable person around here for his expertise with his bow and short sword. He had even performed acts worthy of medals during wartime. He was prominent and held a large influence over everyone in Tahfu, and the one he supported wasn’t Cronen. It was Danny.

He reason was, ‘Danny is better.’

Of course, this was in comparison to Cronen himself, but that didn’t bother him. Rather, he wanted to cry tears of joy because Mandel was smart enough to understand.

Mandel should have been the one that hated Danny *the most*—Cronen just wanted Tina to take a lesson from him, since she just allowed her feelings to control her.

But, now isn’t the time for that. For now, he had to do his best to apologize to Kei without provoking him. Cronen sighed, *why am I the only one who has to worry about it...*

Even though it was something he decided for himself, he wasn’t sure he could go through with it. He took a quiet, deep breath to calm himself down, “Haa...” And then he lightly sighed again, he’d sighed too many times to count today.

† † †

Upon returning to the village, Kei found himself quite confused when he saw Cronen prostrating himself in front of him.

Cronen told him that Danny attacked Aileen in her sleep.

“What...?” Kei’s expression turned dark as if he was about to deliver divine wrath upon them.

Aileen saw it and quickly cut in, “Wait, Kei! Wait!”

According to her, rather than Danny attacking her, he was just in the same room as her when she woke up.

Kei had his doubts about that, but if Aileen didn’t mind, then there was no reason for him to do anything serious about it. Since she wanted to stay somewhere else, they decided to just swap the

houses that they were staying in. Jessica was very happy when she heard that Aileen was going to be staying there instead of Kei.

Even though Aileen didn't mind, when he went to Bennett's house, Kei put pressure on Danny any time he saw him. Dinner was entertaining; the air was so thick with nerves that Cynthia broke out in a cold sweat.

After dinner he planned to stay up and alert like the night before, but the bed in Bennett's house was so comfortable that he fell sound asleep even while wearing all of his equipment.

Luckily, the bandits didn't attack that night.

The next morning Aileen was out in front of Cronen's house stretching in some baggy pants and a leather vest that made her look like one of the villagers.

"How is it? Are you feeling better?" He asked as he watched.

She just smiled slightly instead of answering him.

Crunch. The scuffing of gravel. A gust of wind blew through and Aileen kicked off the ground.

Step in. Cartwheel. Round off. Double backflip.

Crunch, louder than the other steps, she jumped up. She jumped high enough that Kei almost had to look up.

She did a skillful triple twist and landed perfectly. With a mischievous smile she slowly raised her head. "Not too bad!"

"Is that so." Kei nodded with his arms folded, looking satisfied.

Next to him, Tina and Cronen had watched intently, standing stock still and slack jawed.

"Wow! That was great!!"

"Hehehe, right?" Aileen looked proudly at Jessica, who played by her feet. She kept showing off somersaults and backflips to Jessica's delight.

If she's this energetic, I suppose she's fine now.

It was all right to say that she was recovered now. Even if the worst was to come, Kei believed that they would have more options now.

Kei decided that it was time to leave.

Aileen soothed Jessica. She started to cry when she heard that Aileen was leaving. Bennett gave Kei the food and other living necessities that were asked of him.

There were some delays, but they somehow managed to finish their preparations before noon.

“It was short, but thank you for your hospitality, Bennett.”

Some of the villagers came to the edge of town with the pair to see them off.

Kei looked behind him at the woods. If they went past the grove to the brook and traveled along it to the road, they could follow that east to the town of Satyna. Their final destination was Urvan, the fortress city, but to be on the safe side they decided to take the highway and go through several other towns.

“Kei, it wasn’t long, but I had fun.”

“Yeah, me too, Mandel.” He grinned as he shook Mandel’s hand.

“Oh my, it’s sad to part ways,” Bennett said as he stroked his beard and made a very sad expression. He was actually relieved that they were leaving so soon, but he didn’t let that slip out.

Still smiling, Kei replied, “It really is a shame that we’re leaving already.”

“And about the letter, thank you. I’ll leave it to you.”

“Of course, it’s an easy task.”

Bennett rustled around in his pouch and pulled out an envelope as he bowed.

It seemed that his daughter was the wife of a craftsman in Satyna. Since they were already going there, Bennett asked them to deliver the letter. He was originally going to ask a peddler to deliver it, but he likely wanted to scrimp on the fee it would incur.

“I’ll make sure she gets it. It’s Kiska-jou⁶, right?”

“She’s not at the age to be called ‘jou’ anymore.” Bennett laughed merrily.

Next to him, Anka hobbled a few steps forward. “Kei-dono,” she pulled some crystal fragments out of her robes and chanted in a hoarse voice, 『Bondezirojn. La grandaj spiritoj benos vin.』

The crystals cracked and a gentle breeze blew by. The shards were picked up by the wind and twinkled as they flew into the sky.

Kei thought he heard innocent laughter.

“—The best of luck to you on your travels,” she finished her blessing and looked pleased.

“Thank you, Anka...”

“Thanks, Anka!”

Kei and Aileen bowed before they mounted Sasuke. Kei took the front and Aileen sat behind him, clinging to his back.

⁶ -jou: A respectful way to refer to a young or unmarried lady.

With both them, and their supplies Sasuke looked back at Kei as if saying, 'H-heavy,' but since they weren't going at full speed, it shouldn't be a problem.

"Sorry Sasuke, but please bear with it." Kei rubbed Sasuke's neck.

Sasuke snorted as if sighing and saying, 'Oh well, I suppose it'll be fine.'

Kei spurred his flanks and Sasuke slowly started forward.

"Good bye, everyone!! Stay well!!" Aileen waved and yelled back to the villagers who saw them off.

"Take care of yourselves!" Came their reply.

Clack, clack. They entered the grove and Aileen fixed her position when she lost sight of the villagers.

"They were nice people... weren't they, Kei?"

"Yeah..."

Kei relaxed his shoulders after he heard her innocent tone.

"Will we be able to come back again?"

After a short while, he quietly answered, "Yeah..."

"Let's come back again!"

But Kei didn't listen.

It had been around two days. Two days since they arrived in this world.

With their rest finished, they made their way toward Satyna.

Afterwords

Chapter 13

A full day has finally passed. I'm looking forward to everyone's thoughts!

Chapter 15

This marks the end of the Tahfu arc.